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# Russian Private Military Companies: An Evolving Set of Tools in Russian Military Strategy

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# **Russian Private Military Companies: An Evolving Set of Tools in Russian Military Strategy**

*Major Justin Bristow*

## **SEVERAL TOOLS FOR THE STATE**

As understood by Western analysts, Russia's military strategy includes significant and increasing emphasis on new and asymmetric capabilities, including non-military and indirect tools. Among those are the use of Private Military Companies (PMC). While the Russian model can be observed to predate current Russian strategy, it is developing in a robust and multifaceted way, driven by deliberate state and private non-state interests, and useful to what the Russian General Staff calls "New Type War."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, while in 2015 Russian officials regretted that the size of their PMCs "did not occupy as big a space as one would assume,"<sup>2</sup> efforts mandated by the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov, to catch-up and surpass others<sup>3</sup> have seen substantial progress. One industry attention-grabbing measure that captures some of this motivation are the roughly 700,000<sup>4</sup> security contractors in Russia and around 200,000 registered Cossacks.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian perception of PMCs is broader than the West's. In fact, the use of the term "PMC" may be misleading if the reader over-lays Western defense concepts and descriptions to Russia. In the West, for instance, PMCs can include private security providers, which are the contracting organization for hiring military expertise to perform operational support functions to free up operational forces and do so under contract with their home government and required to follow national and international law.<sup>6</sup> Russian laws address certain security providers working internally in Russia but do not cover any legal basis for similar or greater military activity abroad. Indeed, "mercenary" activity is illegal. Rather these entities may exist under the aegis of Russian President Vladimir Putin's description of "instruments for the realization of national interests where the state itself does not have to be involved."<sup>7</sup>

In the pursuit of "New Type War," the Russian security approach requires "indirect" actions covert preparation and execution, the use of banned methods of warfare where the adversary has an advantage, and low expenditure of resources.<sup>8</sup> Contributing to these advantages, according to the authors, is a PMC's relative "freedom in the choice of methods for the achievement" of objectives relative to the methods of "regular armies."<sup>9</sup> Contributing to this freedom, the use of PMCs "presents the military aspects of state foreign policy with immunity from the norms of international law."<sup>10</sup>

PMCs are defined in a variety of ways in Russia. However, there are three types of non-state "irregular forces"<sup>11</sup> that could usefully be considered to be PMCs.<sup>12</sup> The first is what might be characterized as Traditional Private Military Companies: private providers of military staff support, security guards, and logistics enablers in combat zones. Another group is that made of volunteers or citizen militias, which famously include Cossacks. There is also another category that covers private forces existing in a gray area not associated with the other two groups, and which serves in combat abroad, or "Private" Militarized Companies.<sup>13</sup> The term "Private" Militarized Companies comes from Russian military theorists, Colonels (retired) Igor Popov and Musa Khamzatov who draw a distinction between PMCs and these groups. "Private" Militarized Companies are different from Traditional PMCs because they are not independent companies but affiliates of larger business interests. Those business interests and therefore the military companies themselves operate with a large degree of coordination with

the Russian state that goes beyond specific missions or contracts. This paper will characterize and describe each of these types of PMCs to examine how and why they operate as part of a set of capabilities that allows Russia to achieve security objectives.

## **RUSSIAN SECURITY SERVICE GROUP**

A distinctive characteristic of the Russian Traditional PMC is that they attempt to preserve their legal standing to perform support roles with a profit incentive. Personnel in the Russian Traditional PMC are significantly made up of former soldiers and others who were trained by the government in their skills. This PMC makes an effort to remain legitimate, even as Russia does not have laws that address PMCs. Their functions are mostly support. A good example is the Russian Security Service (RSB).

Oleg Krinitsyn, a retired member of the Federal Security Service (FSB) registered the RSB group in 2011.<sup>14</sup> The group has guarded its status under international law and performs operational support functions. Seeking mainly monetary gain, RSB is willing to perform services for a wide range of customers.

The company has provided various operational support functions in many regions. The RSB Group began its operations by providing security to ships in the Gulf of Aden under threat from Somali pirates.<sup>15</sup> Since then, it has provided numerous teams to secure ships in international waters and performed this function for the Russian government in its Syria campaign.<sup>16</sup> Even more lucrative, however, was a contract beginning in 2016 to perform de-mining operations in Benghazi, Libya.<sup>17</sup> According to a map on its website, as of 2019, RSB has fulfilled contracts on land and at sea at 15 locations in Africa, 9 in Eurasia, 5 in the Middle East, and one in South America.<sup>18</sup> In addition to serving contracts overseas, RSB provides protective services in Russia including on call VIP security, security consulting, and security for commercial real estate. The company describes its services as defensive when providing security without “attacking anyone during guard duty.”<sup>19</sup>

Krinitsyn has made an aggressive attempt to preserve the legitimacy of RSB to maximize profitable contracts. The company boasts its status as a UN recognized provider of security services,<sup>20</sup> refuses to hire Russians that have served in Ukraine,<sup>21</sup> and even refuses to store or ship its operational weapons in Russia so as to more easily comply with Russian law.<sup>22</sup> In order to boost advertisement and the transparency of his company, Krinitsyn gives in-depth interviews to journalists and has even been criticized for exaggerating the capabilities of his modest company.<sup>23</sup> The guarding of RSB’s legitimacy in international eyes allows the company to have representation in the West and to fulfill its only task in the eyes of its founder- “to earn money.”<sup>24</sup>

Because they are motivated by financial incentives and capable of adapting to customer needs, traditional Russian PMCs can vary along a spectrum of legitimacy and types of services performed. However, RSB provides a good example of the capabilities of Russian PMCs that are most legitimate and most operational support focused.

Although RSB does possess a cyber defense detachment,<sup>25</sup> most of its services concern small unit tasks associated with protection functions. RSB provides security against pirates on the high seas, training, mine clearance, convoy security, and protection for VIPs and corporate property.<sup>26</sup> The company emphasizes preventive measures like electronic surveillance in its security, utilizes a call center for operations inside Russia, and is prepared to defend its own personnel and designated objectives in case of combat according to criteria outlined in contracts.<sup>27</sup>

A small cadre of permanent personnel that utilizes a larger pool of potential personnel comprises RSB's organization. Just 30 personnel are employed as RSB's permanent cadre but they can assign hundreds of other possible contractors to assignments based customer needs.<sup>28</sup> RSB has utilized groups as small as 3 to 7 people to provide protection for shipping<sup>29</sup> and slightly larger groups to perform mine clearance operations.

RSB seems to rely to a great degree on the prior skills of its personnel, but it does conduct training both in Russia and while on assignment. According to Krinitsyn, RSB prefers more sophisticated military tactics designed to provide dispersed fire support and for that reason recruits from Russian military intelligence or the FSB rather than the police.<sup>30</sup> RSB also utilizes a training facility in the Moscow region where it conducts small unit training for personnel and paying customers. However, perhaps because the composition of RSB teams are identified only upon assignment, they conduct training together after they have begun to fulfill their contracts.<sup>31</sup>

RSB utilizes equipment that is sophisticated but light and the company stages its operational weapons outside of Russia. The company issues body armor, a relatively small amount of ammunition, spare magazines, first aid, night vision devices, binoculars, a satellite telephone, rations and weapons maintenance equipment to personnel assigned to provide security.<sup>32</sup> Personnel assigned to guard ships also utilize the acoustic cannon HyperSpike. Notably, although it stores some of its other tactical equipment at a Russian military base, RSB issues weapons to personnel only after they leave the borders of Russia. To do this, RSB utilizes a "floating platform with weapons in neutral waters."<sup>33</sup>

RSB's ties to the Russian state are either contractual or informal. Although RSB has performed tasks for the Russian state, its customers are not necessarily Russian partners and with the exception of Syria, RSB does not appear to have been involved in major Russian military campaigns. However, the Russian government likely possesses informal leverage over the company. The company's personnel are retired security officers, its equipment is secured in part on a Russian base and the company acknowledges that its members "remain patriots of our country" who "take all measures to preserve stability, confidence in tomorrow, and security for our citizens."<sup>34</sup>

Company personnel tend to be reserve Russian security officers that are known to RSB personnel when they are recruited. Krinitsyn described his employees as "adults, 30-40 years old, former officers with combat experience" that preferably speak foreign languages and have been personally recommended by RSB staff.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, recruits are selected for their professionalism in "fulfilling assigned tasks without creating problems, [as well as] responsibility, self control and composure in any situation."<sup>36</sup>

RSB utilizes a small number of internationally dispersed facilities with its training and headquarters in Moscow. It has a regional office in Senegal, and has representation in Turkey, Germany, and Italy.<sup>37</sup>

## **THE ALL-POWERFUL DON HOST**

Perhaps the most recognized form of volunteer groups are the Cossacks. These citizen militias base their organizations on centuries old Russian traditions to provide security, combat and civil administrative functions similar to paramilitaries and insurgents. Operating for hundreds of years, the Cossacks are Russia's oldest form of private military company<sup>38</sup> and one with rich cultural heritage, but the 21<sup>st</sup> century Cossacks are more than cultural legacy. Cossack organizations have become a unique type of Russian PMC. The Russian government has divided Cossack organizations between registered Cossacks that subordinate themselves to the state and unregistered groups that are more independent. The All-Powerful Don Host (ADH) described below is one of the more active unregistered organizations.

The ADH grew out of the post Soviet social phenomena which recreated renewed Cossack organizations after 70 years of Soviet repression. Its leader, or Ataman, Nikolai Kozitsyn has led ADH since its inception. As a former Soviet warrant officer, Kozitsyn created the organization after his supporters used “psychological pressure” to force retired Major General Chumichev from leadership of ADH’s predecessor.<sup>39</sup> The faction led by Kozitsyn officially called itself the International Union of Social Organizations: The All-Powerful Don Host.

As the power struggle between Kozitsyn and Chumichev implies, the ADH has performed in a manner that has not always conformed to the desires of local Russian authorities or fellow Cossacks. Refusing for years to pay for rented property, interfering with local authorities trying to execute basic real estate ordinances, picketing city government administrations and even signing a separate peace with Chechnya’s insurgent government in 1994,<sup>40</sup> the ADH has very much been a contributor to the chaotic atmosphere of southern Russia. However, experience competing with local authorities while winning popular acclaim would prove to be an asset for Russia.

Members of Kozitsyn’s organization fought in Transdnistria and Abkhazia in the early 1990’s but its largest contribution to Russian objectives was in the War in Donbass in 2014 and 2015. Characterizing the Donbass as a region comprised of 80 percent Cossacks, and having himself been born there, Kozitsyn announced his intent to intervene in eastern Ukraine as early as February, 2014.<sup>41</sup> On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, the ADH proclaimed the creation of the Cossack National Guard comprised of both Russian and Donbass Cossacks. Weeks later, representing an organization of perhaps 300 people,<sup>42</sup> Kozitsyn and a force comprised of two truckloads of Cossacks arrived in the coal mining town of Antratsit. Having seized Antratsit’s administrative center and unfurled the Russian and ADH flag, Kozitsyn’s forces set about building what the Cossack leader would later claim was a force of 15 thousand.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the fighting in Ukraine, the forces of the Cossack National Guard distinguished themselves by their low standard of military professionalism. Boasting after 2014 that Cossacks “a-priori cannot sit in trenches” and must advance<sup>44</sup> the “glorious Cossacks” earned condemnation from the first Russian commander in Donbass, Igor Strelkov, for defying his orders, refusing to defend territory and “increasing panic.”<sup>45</sup>

Even as Igor Strelkov assessed its battlefield performance as poor, ADH demonstrated a high capacity to organize. Allegedly inspired from the Bible, the ADH instituted a 10 percent tithe on businesses in towns it controlled and continued to build its force. Throughout 2014 the ADH expanded the zone of its administrative and commercial control from Antratsit northwestward along the seam between the Donetsk and Lugansk regions.<sup>46</sup> Having commandeered armored vehicles and requisitioned trainers from local military facilities<sup>47</sup> the Cossacks became capable of wielding larger and more complex formations.

Despite the low quality of their forces, the ADH’s focus on administrative management and developing itself finally paid off in the winter of 2015. During the battle of Debaltsevo in February, 2015 the Cossacks proved capable of conducting an urban attack and clearance. Besides Kozitsyn’s own triumphalist retelling of the battle, one account credited the Cossacks with providing forces that cut off Ukrainian forces in Debaltsevo<sup>48</sup> while a separatist leader at the battle later wrote that the arrival of a Cossack force of about 600 was a critical element of the ultimate Russian success there.<sup>49</sup>

Thanks to historical memory and relatively high concentrations of ethnic Cossacks, fighting in the Black Sea region will likely see continued use of Cossack forces. However, the bulk of the Cossack’s contribution to Russian security is likely to be in Russia itself where registered Cossacks form a vast

administrative and security reserve for the state. In general, Cossacks possess capabilities that enable them to administer and develop their organizations while simultaneously conducting combat operations.

By charter and tradition, the Cossacks perform a variety of social functions more similar to those of non-government organizations. Cossack organizations generally run a variety of cultural activities including youth education, museum curation, collecting funds for charity, and caring for the infirm. The ADH charter states that the Host may possess property as well as collect the proceeds of its own industrial and agricultural activities. Returns from these actions are indivisible among membership and accrue collectively to the organization.<sup>50</sup>

The traditional Cossack role of providing for the security of Russia also persists. According to government decree Number 93, registered Cossack Hosts are required to perform services for the state. Among these services is registering and preparing youth for military service, contributing to the state in times of crisis, contributing to territorial defense, preserving social order, firefighting, defending Russia's borders, fighting terrorists, and finally protecting forests, animals, and cultural heritage.<sup>51</sup> Cossack Hosts in Russia often protect civil order and the Russian government has used them in this role at the Olympics, World Cup events, internet forums and political demonstrations.<sup>52</sup>

In times of crisis, Cossacks have turned their social networks into protest or counter-protest movements and even revenue generating enterprises in Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> In Crimea, the Kuban Cossacks organized civil disobedience and crowds that impeded both visiting NATO ships and the Ukrainian government from operating there.<sup>54</sup> While notoriously poor defenders, Cossack military endeavors in Abkhazia and Ukraine evolved from civil disobedience to small unit tactics and eventually larger combat operations.

Although the Russian government is increasing its control, Cossack organizations function at least partially with democratic organization. The Host operates under principles of democratic centralism, in which subordinate councils and the Orthodox Church hold influence over policy and leadership appointments. However, in late 2018 representatives from Russia's 11 registered Cossack Hosts agreed to unite under a single structure with a presidentially appointed Ataman. Although it is unclear how the new All Russian Cossack Host will function, at least in name it has retained some structures that previously enabled democratic centralism. Additionally, unregistered Cossack organizations continue to exist and retain their structures requiring democratic centralism.

In battle, and despite difficulties in following all directives, Cossacks have operated under the nominal tactical direction of other headquarters. While the Host retained its structure and authority, in the War in Abkhazia, Cossack units fought beneath a council of rebel groups. In the First Chechen War, some Cossacks fought beneath the Russian government. In Donbass, Cossacks fought under other Russian and separatist commanders.

Cossacks gain from the military skills of prior service members but their level of expertise is much less than other PMCs and despite a requirement to train their members in basic military skills they often require additional training to accomplish assigned tasks. For example, the city of Moscow provided training contracts to train Cossacks in "the necessary knowledge and applied skills" to preserve "social order" and public events.<sup>55</sup> Not one to be humble about his organization, even Nikolai Kozitsyn remarked that those who volunteered to fight with the ADH in Ukraine were so old or minimally trained that they required a great deal of re-training on the battlefield.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps due to their lack of combat skill, the Cossacks have become proficient at improvising training in combat zones. Cossacks used a facility to train urban combat before assaults in Abkhazia<sup>57</sup> and their own training camp in Donbass that "reported to no one."<sup>58</sup>

The Cossacks have very limited military equipment in Russia during peacetime but acquire a wide range of weapons in conflict. Russian laws regulating weapons restrict Cossacks from storing or carrying their own weapons. Except for cultural events or competitions, Cossacks cannot even carry cold steel arms. When acting against demonstrators in Moscow, Cossacks were limited to the use of weighted whips called *nagaika*.<sup>59</sup> However, in conflicts in Abkhazia, Chechnya, Crimea and Donbass Cossacks acquired a wide range of weapons locally or from the Russian government. With the use of two barges, Cossacks participated in an amphibious assault against Georgian government forces in Abkhazia and there is evidence they operated improvised rocket artillery, grenade launchers, infantry fighting vehicles, tanks, and self propelled artillery<sup>60</sup> in Donbass.

Cossack ties to the Russian state are both informal and formal with shared ideology playing a critical role in the relationship. While the Cossack organizations of the 1990's were independent, the Russian state now has more control. The Russian state has used influence with the Orthodox Church, promoted retired FSB officers as Cossack Atamans, and most recently, regulated and consolidated the registered Cossacks under a presidential appointee. However, it is important to note that regardless of state influence, the prevailing ideology among Cossacks would lead them to support the government's stance against the West because as one Cossack organization stated, "every attempt of the lords of Russia...that tried to impose Western reforms in Russia always, we repeat, always ended poorly for its authors."<sup>61</sup>

Though once considered a nationality, membership in most contemporary Cossack organizations is voluntary and varied. According to the 2010 census, 67 thousand residents of Russia self identified as ethnic Cossacks,<sup>62</sup> or less than half the number of registered Cossacks in Russia. The disparity in numbers can largely be explained by the repression of Cossacks during the Soviet period to the point that many contemporary Cossacks have limited ethnic Cossack lineage. Nevertheless, the pool of Cossacks in Russia is sufficiently large to deliver a wide range of personnel with different skills to Cossack organizations and include prior members of Spetsnaz units and professional soldiers.<sup>63</sup> Also, due to frequent participation in conflict in the Black Sea region, members of Cossack organizations have basic military training and combat experience.

## **VOSTOK- THE MODEL OF A "PRIVATE" MILITARIZED COMPANY**

If Cossack organizations have a tendency to operate using centuries old legal norms and Traditional PMCs exist as extra-legal entities while trying to remain legitimate, "Private" Militarized Companies conduct missions that can be seen as questionable or outright illegal but nevertheless in coordination with the Russian state. Often tasked with combat roles in modern "New Type War," so-called "Private" Militarized Companies coordinate with the Russian government to further the interests of Russia and the companies' proprietors: state interest and profit. Formed out of a clan of Chechens during the Second Chechen War, the Vostok Battalion was arguably the first modern Russian enterprise to operate in this way.

Jabriel Yamadayev formed the initial Vostok forces in Chechnya and incorporated them into forces opposed to Moscow's rule in the 1990s. In November of 1999, most of Yamadayev's group switched sides and began to fight for the Russian government. By March, 2003 the Moscow backed Chechen Republic used Yamadayev's forces to form the Vostok Battalion against Chechnya's insurgent groups.

While officially part of government forces tasked with pacifying Chechnya, Vostok soon distinguished itself by engaging in the same tactics and cruelty as its opponents with the tacit approval of the government. In 2005 at the village of Borozdinovskiy, characterized by Vostok's commander Selim



Yamadayevev as a commonly known “Wahhabite village,”<sup>64</sup> members of Vostok retaliated for the killing of one of their personnel by terrorizing the entire village. Vostok’s killing, torture and kidnapping sent a powerful enough message that 1,100 residents abandoned the village.<sup>65</sup> Russian commanders and the Chechen administration subsequently denied all criminal claims against Vostok. Although Chechen authorities did eventually sentence Lieutenant Mukhadi Aziyev to a conditional three years for exceeding his administrative authority,<sup>66</sup> there is little evidence Vostok changed its tactics.

Apart from using insurgent methods, another unique characteristic was Vostok’s role as part of a larger criminal enterprise. In addition to being a government enforcer, as the head of a criminal organization with business interests as far from Chechnya as Saint Petersburg,<sup>67</sup> Selim Yamadayevev could help finance his own forces. Vostok funded itself in ways that would be familiar to insurgent groups including by plundering villages during clearing operations and coercing businesses to sign away their property.<sup>68</sup>

Although Yamadayevev tended his personal criminal interests in defiance of Russian authority, the dominance of Vostok over irregular opponents occurred thanks to coordination with the Russian military in combat. The Vostok Battalion reported directly to what was then the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) at the Russian General Staff and incorporated a liaison to coordinate with the rest of government forces in Chechnya. The GRU also trained the members of Vostok at Vostok’s training facilities, had representatives at Vostok’s headquarters and sometimes participated in operations.<sup>69</sup>

After Russia installed Chechnya’s pro-Russian ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov, Yamadayevev literally fought to maintain his usefulness. Vostok began to perform tasks more associated with traditional PMCs, including a contract to secure Russian engineers in Lebanon in 2006<sup>70</sup> but it faced mounting pressure after Russian authorities began to criticize it and even open criminal cases.<sup>71</sup> Despite its legal trouble, Vostok under Yamadayevev would again prove itself useful in the 2008 war with Georgia. Fighting alongside Russian forces in South Ossetia, Yamadayevev claimed his forces performed excellently and that the “Georgian soldiers ran from us like cowards.”<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, despite success in Georgia, Yamadayevev had made too many enemies. Kadyrov officially disbanded the Vostok Battalion and a contract killer executed Yamadayevev in Dubai in March of 2009.

Despite its official disbandment, accounts imply that Chechen fighters continue to fight in similar ways for the Russian government and that the Vostok Battalion still performs a variety of military tasks. Though separatist authorities claimed it was a different Vostok Battalion, observers in Ukraine reported Chechen fighters using the same unit name in the battle for the Donetsk airport.<sup>73</sup> In 2016, several Russian news outlets reported that members of the Vostok Battalion were performing duties as military policemen in Syria.<sup>74</sup>

“Private” Militarized Companies are unique because they exist as part of their proprietor’s business empire and often operate outside of legal norms to execute the most difficult and risky combat tasks. Apart from Vostok, the most well known company of this type is Wagner, a name the group received as a result of its executive officer’s Germanophilia. As Vostok and Wagner demonstrate, this type of company can perform the same duties as traditional PMCs, but can also operate as its opponents do and with the support of the Russian government and military.

Militarized companies can and do perform traditional PMC tasks like consulting, training, and security but they are most distinguished by unique methods in accomplishing other battlefield tasks. Far from an embarrassment, the illegitimate methods of “Private” Militarized Companies like the Vostok Battalion in Chechnya became an important element in Russia’s success there. Although there is a sense of “consternation and bewilderment”<sup>75</sup> on the part of Western analysts, the “indigenization of the

conflict”—Russia’s willingness to incorporate groups like Vostok and then to permit them to utilize the same methods as insurgents—can be considered one of four key elements in Russia’s success in Chechnya.<sup>76</sup>

This is not to say that militarized companies engage in questionable activity to avoid direct and risky combat, the opposite is true. Vostok participated in the assault of Georgian hard points in 2008 and Russian commanders expected Wagner members to be in the “first wave” of attacking forces, coordinating air and artillery strikes in Ukraine and in Syria.<sup>77</sup> A veteran of Wagner’s company described the progression of an attack in Syria as first led by Wagner’s fighters, then followed up by Syrian government troops, and finally completed by Russian journalists to give interviews to the victorious Syrian soldiers.<sup>78</sup>

Even as they fight asymmetric opponents, militarized companies use their battlefield influence to secure the business interests of their proprietor. Though it did open charges against Vostok’s criminal enterprises, the Russian government ultimately permitted its leader Selim Yamadayev to continue his activities for years before his death. Similarly, far from being a costly endeavor for its owner, Wagner’s military campaign in Syria is now paid for by the Syrian government and has resulted in the award of 25 percent of the proceeds of Syria’s oil wells to Wagner’s owner, Yevgeniy Prigozhin.<sup>79</sup>

Often fighting as cohesive battalions or even brigades, militarized companies can form large cohesive units that are coordinated with Russian or partner forces. Wagner operated in Syria with as many as over two thousand forces organized into four brigades comprised of battalions of around 300 personnel.<sup>80</sup> According to a veteran of the company, even a single battalion of Wagner forces can be formidable, comprised of three tactical scout-assault companies, a fire support company, a security company, and supporting platoons including communications and air defense.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, both Vostok and Wagner operated with the coordination and fire support of Russian or Russian partner forces.

Despite denials, evidence suggests that private militarized companies are organized by their owners in partnership and coordination with the Russian state. For example, although sources close to the Russian defense ministry say Wagner’s owner Prigozhin was initially unwilling, they allege he was asked by Russian authorities to create the group. Simultaneous with the development of Wagner, Prigozhin’s Russian food service company began to profit from extremely lucrative contracts with the Russian ministry of defense.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the tight relationship between militarized companies and the Russian government, it is important to note that Russia can transfer the role of supporting these companies to partners. Since around 2017, Russia transferred the role of supporting Wagner to the Syrian government and Wagner has since relied financially, logistically, and tactically on Syrian government support. Of course, since the transfer, the pay, logistics and tactical support that Wagner has received has been of worse quality.<sup>83</sup>

Another characteristic of militarized companies is their relatively high experience level when the Russian government utilizes them. While Vostok was a cohesive fighting force years before defecting to Moscow, Wagner utilized a training center collocated with the 10<sup>th</sup> GRU special forces brigade at Molkino to provide a two month training regimen to forces deploying to Syria.<sup>84</sup> Wagner is allegedly capable of building units before they deploy<sup>85</sup> as it conducts not only small arms training, but training in combat engineering, armored vehicle operation, artillery support and air defense.<sup>86</sup>

Private militarized companies are capable of using a wide range of Russian or partner force equipment. One former Wagner officer described its equipment in Syria as extraordinary for a PMC, including mortars, howitzers, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers.<sup>87</sup>

According to a Wagner veteran, Wagner forces also had man portable surface to air missiles, recoilless anti-tank systems and grenade launchers.<sup>88</sup> After support for Wagner forces in Syria shifted to the Syrian government, the Wagner forces began to receive Syrian equipment.<sup>89</sup>

Even when they operate for other governments, the fact that Russian militarized companies and their activities are illegal under Russian law means that they work at the pleasure of Moscow's prosecutors. Western analysts have argued the illegal status of militarized companies under Russian law permits selective "enforcement mechanisms to keep groups like Wagner in line."<sup>90</sup> Indeed, one of Wagner's predecessors, Slavonic Corps Limited, attempted to avoid Russian law and operate in support of Syrian regime forces before the Russian government had taken the decision to intervene. After Slavonic Corps failed in its mission, the Russian government arrested and convicted two of its leaders for breaking mercenary laws.<sup>91</sup>

The Russian government can exercise direct or implied control of its militarized companies. When militarized companies receive financing and tactical support from Russia, the Russian military likely has a great degree of tactical control. However, when these groups operate beneath a partner government the level of coordination with Moscow may fall. For example, the failure of Russian forces to prevent or deter American airstrikes against Wagner forces in 2018 may be related to Wagner's shift to Syrian government support in 2017.

Militarized companies employ a wide range of experienced personnel from Russia and communities sympathetic to Russia. According to former Wagner employees, there is no shortage of recruits<sup>92</sup> and rather than recruit solely through personal networks, Wagner recruits more widely, using a polygraph test to screen applicants.<sup>93</sup> As the Chechens of the Vostok Battalion demonstrate, militarized companies can be comprised of non-Russians and Wagner includes both Ukrainians<sup>94</sup> and Serbians.<sup>95</sup>

## **THE CASE FOR COST EFFECTIVENESS OF RUSSIAN PMCs**

Though they have shown themselves capable of winning and shaping struggles between "asymmetric" forces, Russian PMCs are distinct from regular forces in that they are relatively cheap to employ and low risk for the state's diplomatic and military reputation.

With an economy and military budget many times smaller than that of the United States, Russia has used PMCs to cheaply compete in New Type War. Russia spent about \$950 million dollars on eighteen months of its Syria campaign from 2015 to 2017,<sup>96</sup> or about \$1.74 million dollars a day. In contrast, the United States spent about \$13.6 million dollars a day during a similar time period to support similar geopolitical objectives in Operation Inherent Resolve.<sup>97</sup> If one discounts purchasing power differences in the cost of Russian goods and services, Russian techniques are still accomplishing similar geopolitical missions at one third the cost of their American counterparts.

Russian PMCs are a component of how Russia fights so cheaply due in part to low personnel costs. While the average income of a Russian soldier in 2017 was about \$660 dollars a month,<sup>98</sup> members of Russia's volunteer forces in Ukraine in 2014 earned just \$240<sup>99</sup> and, as we have seen, the Cossacks even have their own sources of funding. Besides salaries, the Russian government saves on the amount of benefits it is required to dispense to members of all types of PMCs.<sup>100</sup>

While the salaries of members of militarized companies are more lucrative, their cost to the Russian government is reduced by salary structures and sharing costs with business owners and partner states. Wagner employees abroad earn between three to four thousand dollars a month,<sup>101</sup> or about twice as much as a lieutenant in the Russian army.<sup>102</sup> However, they earn as little as four times less when they

are in training rather than in a combat zone.<sup>103</sup> Also, Wagner's activities delivered sources of financing like a stake in Syria's oil infrastructure while the Syrian regime has been made to pay for Wagner's operations.

## A SET OF TOOLS IN PRACTICE

Russian PMCs have each evolved differently in contemporary times and collectively in light of new Russian understandings of the security environment, this New Type War. In the pursuit of this constant and endless environment of conflict, the emphasis on indirect and asymmetric capabilities will continue to develop and PMCs will be part of that. Although Traditional PMCs, Cossack volunteers, and "Private" Militarized Companies specialize in different military tasks and have different structures, objectives, and motivations, their activities when organized for the benefit of the state's objectives are broadly useful and powerful. Together they give the Russian strategy depth and flexibility in having forces available both internally in Russia and externally in places like Libya, Venezuela, Syria, Ukraine, and the Central African Republic. They ensure security, promote citizen participation, and relieve requirements for conventional armed forces on the one hand, and provide some deniable, cost effective combat power on the other hand.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 29

<sup>8</sup> Kartapolov, A.V.. "Uroki voennykh konfliktov, perspektivy razvitiya sredstv i sposobov ih vedeniya. Prjamyje i neprjamyje dejstvija v sovremennykh mezhdunarodnykh konfliktah." *Vestnik Akademii Voyennikh Nauk*, ser., 2, no. 51 (2015): 26-36.

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<sup>11</sup> Popov, I. M., and M. M. Khamzatov. *Voyna Budushevo*. 3rd ed. Moscow: Kuchkovo Polye, 2018. pp, 252-254

<sup>12</sup> Østensen, Åse Gilje, and Tor Bukkvoll. *Russian Use of Private Military and Security*. Report no. 18/01300. , Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Popov, I. M., and M. M. Khamzatov. *Voyna Budushevo*. 3rd ed. Moscow: Kuchkovo Polye, 2018. pp, 252-254

<sup>14</sup> Østensen, Åse Gilje, and Tor Bukkvoll. *Russian Use of Private Military and Security*. Report no. 18/01300. , Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. Page 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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